

Cuba Paradigms

2. The NEDCC Experience

ABSTRACT

Northeast Document Conservation Center staff members first went to Cuba in 1996. NEDCC has since worked with a number of Cuban cultural institutions to promote professional exchange in the field of preservation. The National Archives of Cuba has been an especially important partner in these efforts, as it offers an accomplished conservation staff and enthusiastic administrators committed to preservation. NEDCC has sent numerous conservation and preservation professionals to consult in several Havana institutions, as well as in one provincial archives. A workshop on preservation for provincial archives workers was presented in Cienfuegos. NEDCC has organized seminars, lectures, workshops, demonstrations, and informal surveys in Havana, as well as visits to NEDCC in Andover by Cuban paper and book conservators.

BEGINNINGS

Walter Newman, senior paper conservator at the Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC), first went to Cuba with director Ann Russell in 1996. The idea of going to Cuba was suggested to him in 1994 on the occasion of a three-week practical seminar on American paper conservation techniques which NEDCC offered for Russian paper conservators in its studio. This visit was funded primarily by the Open Society Institute with additional support from the United States Information Agency (USIA). On the last day of the visit an official from the USIA came to Andover to observe this new program. As it happened, that official was soon leaving the Agency to assume a posting charged with cultural affairs at the American Interest Section in Havana. She thought that

Newman could conduct similar training at institutions with paper conservators in Havana as one way to forge relations with Cuban cultural institutions. These were optimistic days of thawing relations between the U.S. and Cuba, and the time seemed ripe for new collaborations. Shortly thereafter Cuban military forces shot down an airplane operated by a Miami-based Cuban anti-Castro group, the embargo was tightened under the Helms-Burton Act, and relations between the two countries took a nose dive. The idea of working with a U.S. government agency to gain access to Cuban cultural institutions and their conservators became totally impractical. The initiative had to wait until NEDCC could find a non-governmental agency with ties to Cuban conservation professionals.

That agency turned out to be the Center for Marine Conservation, a Washington-based organization concerned with environmental conservation which was working with the Museum of Natural History in Havana. Essentially, a fish curator in Washington put NEDCC in touch with a bat curator in Havana at the museum, which has a small but very significant collection of manuscripts and illustrations by internationally-recognized Cuban ichthyologists. The museum served as host for a one-week visit. Private American funders proved to be eager to support training activities in Cuba. Foremost among these has been the Getty Grant Program, with participation also by the Kress Foundation and others. Of course, the visit had to be licensed by the U.S. Treasury Department, and at the time it was necessary to travel through a third country.

Although Cuba is very close to the U.S. geographically, it seems very remote. Because travel between the U.S. and Cuba is severely restricted, travelers must take an indirect or circuitous route to arrive in Havana. Nonetheless, Newman and Russell arrived in Cuba in the summer of 1996 with a full agenda for the week. Newman spent the bulk of his visit doing basic stabilization and rehousing of a collection of beautiful paintings of fish using supplies brought from the U.S. He worked in a studio lent by a

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Fig. 1. Walter Newman lectures Havana paper and book conservators in the laboratory of the National Archives of Cuba.

national conservation center located in a former convent in Old Havana, and he was observed and assisted by conservators from that center and by the archivist from the Natural History Museum. His goal was to make a visible improvement in the preservation of a discrete component of the collection as a concrete gesture of good will. Russell made the rounds of cultural institutions that have conservation staff, meeting the administrators and visiting the studios. Newman accompanied her to the National Archives, which possesses an experienced and capable conservation staff and a welcoming administration that is committed to the preservation of its collections. This was the genesis of a very cordial and productive partnership with the National Archives. By the end of that first visit Newman was invited to return to the Archives six months later, for the second of his four visits to Cuba to date.

During these visits Newman has consulted and conducted workshops in several institutions in Havana, including the National Library, the Institute for Linguistics and Literature, and the Institute of History. He has led demonstrations, workshops, and lectures focused on American paper conservation techniques, map conservation, and parchment conservation (fig. 1). He has conducted informal surveys and organized initial planning for workshops on book and photograph conservation, microfilming and preventive conservation, all of which were carried out by expert colleagues from NEDCC and elsewhere. His most recent visit in March 2000 dealt with the conservation of a collection of the writings of another famous Cuban ichthyologist in the Museum of the History of Science. The purpose of this project was twofold: to provide training for both conservators and archives technicians, and also to leave behind a completed stabilization and rehousing of a collection that can serve as a model

for similar projects in the future. The museum's archivist brought the collection to the studio of the National Archives, where she and Newman jointly processed the documents and placed them in folders and collapsible storage boxes brought from Andover in Newman's suitcase. At the same time he trained the archivist, who will in turn train her technicians, in the basic repair of manuscripts. Newman carried out the treatment of the more complex problems while observed by the National Archives conservators, and they promised to complete the few items he could not finish in two weeks there.

Most rewarding of all for Newman has been getting to know Cuban paper conservators and being able to invite them to NEDCC to participate in three-week internships. Four groups of three conservators each have visited to date. These visits were designed to intro-

duce the techniques, tools, and philosophy of North American paper conservation (fig. 2). The practice of tried-and-true techniques was emphasized, but they also experimented with new and risky procedures using expendable materials donated by NEDCC staff or unearthed at flea markets. Classroom sessions were presented on special topics such as the identification of types of photographs, assessment of plastics used for storage enclosures, and methods of producing alkalizing agents. The visits also offered a panoramic view of the state of the art of paper and book conservation in this country by visiting a variety of conservation and collections-holding institutions in the Boston area. Moreover two groups were escorted to such important Washington institutions as the Library of Congress and the National Archives, while a third group visited facilities in New York. The Cubans



Fig. 2. Cuban conservators from the National Archives, the National Library, and the Institute of Linguistics and Literature practice North American conservation procedures in NEDCC's studio in Andover. (Photo by Ed Eich Photographics)

have been received warmly and graciously in all the institutions they have visited. Finally, Cuban conservators became acquainted with the sources of conservation information available in this country.

A WORKSHOP FOR THE PROVINCES

During a 1998 visit to Cuba Newman looked at suitable sites for a week-long preservation course to be held by NEDCC at a provincial archives. He felt that since most international collaborations in Cuba are centered in Havana it would be desirable to reach out to include other areas of the country. This idea was encouraged by the National Archives, whose staff frequently holds workshops and lectures in the provincial archives that belong to its network. Ultimately the Provincial Archives of Cienfuegos was chosen as the location for the program because it has several key advantages. Cienfuegos, one of the larger cities in Cuba, is located on the southern coast of the island three hours by car from Havana. The size of the city and its location on the coast facilitate travel and accommodations for the participants from outside Cienfuegos. The Provincial Archives has the physical space and meeting rooms necessary to host a week-long course for twenty participants. The Director of the Archives, Dr. Orlando Garcia, has contacts with scholars and researchers in the United States and is accustomed to working with foreign institutions. The Archives also employs an experienced paper conservator capable of providing assistance during a preservation course.

The Cienfuegos Archives has done an impressive job collecting printed and manuscript material relating to the city of Cienfuegos. In many cases, much of this material would have been destroyed or simply thrown away without their intervention. At the same time, the archives faces acute storage problems including inadequate storage furniture and a severe lack of quality storage materials. In this respect, the Cienfuegos Provincial Archives is like most of the provincial archives and regional libraries in Cuba.

The preservation course was designed and conducted in March 1999 by Todd Pattison, associate book conservator at NEDCC. Pattison has had extensive experience teaching both in workshops given at NEDCC and in for-credit graduate courses at a nearby university. The course in Cienfuegos was attended by twenty archivists and librarians from provincial institutions in Cienfuegos, Santa Clara, Trinidad, and the surrounding areas (fig. 3). It began with an overview of the topic of preservation, its relationship with the other functions of a library or archives, and the

importance of understanding and appreciating the need for preservation on the part of both employees and patrons. Some participants indicated that preservation should be taken care of by the paper conservator working in a given institution, and that if none were currently on the staff the preservation problem could be addressed by simply hiring a conservator. Many people working in institutions with collections of paper-based materials in Cuba seem to think of preservation primarily as item-by-item conservation treatment by a specially trained individual.

The theoretical aspect of the course concentrated on efforts that institutions with little or no money, supplies, or trained staff can undertake: disaster planning, security, storage, shelving and handling practices, and environment. These discussions focused on measures that could be taken immediately but also included those that might not be implemented until years in the future given the current economic situation. One new concept introduced to the participants in the program was Integrated Pest Management, which is especially important since mold and insects are formidable problems in Cuba. The archives at Cienfuegos had been fumigating materials using thymol in a wooden cabinet. Pattison discussed relevant safety issues and the need to protect humans along with archival materials, as well as preventive and non-toxic methods for combating biological attack.

Next, practical hands-on sessions demonstrated the fabrication of protective enclosures and simple book repair procedures. During the first of these activities the participants seemed to really get involved in the course, and practical sessions each day helped to maintain their interest and enthusiasm. Although not all of the participants



Fig. 3. Todd Pattison (kneeling) and Dr. Orlando Garcia (standing behind him) with participants from the workshop given at the Provincial Archives in Cienfuegos

will carry out this practical work in the future, it was meaningful for them to see that simple procedures can be used to safely repair and extend the life of materials. Moreover, given the conditions in Cuban collections, the lesson was reinforced that the single most important step that they can take to preserve their collections is to house them more appropriately.

There are unique challenges involved with planning a regional workshop in Cuba. NEDCC benefited from the experience and advice of Dr. Rebecca Scott, a professor of history at the University of Michigan. Dr. Scott and many of her graduate students have been traveling to the Cienfuegos Archives for several years to do research on primary materials there. She was aware of the daunting task of preserving these materials and the need for increased awareness of more current practices. She was also instrumental in obtaining funding for this project and facilitated extensive prior discussion about the course with Dr. Garcia while he was in the United States in the fall of 1998. Subsequent visits to Cienfuegos by Dr. Scott and her students allowed additional communication between NEDCC and the Provincial Archives prior to the course. This was especially useful since communication between the U.S. and Cuba can be difficult.

Six months prior to the course, materials for the hands-on sessions were shipped to Cuba. Unfortunately these materials still had not cleared customs when the course ended. Although almost ninety pounds of tools and supplies for the course were carried by the instructor to Cuba in his luggage, this was inadequate for the twenty participants and the activities planned. Fortunately the participants were very adept at dealing with shortages of materials and made miniature examples of different enclosures so that everyone had the experience of working with the materials. In order to have expendable books for practicing hands-on techniques, a number were purchased from used book stalls in Havana prior to traveling to Cienfuegos. This allowed the participants to practice repair techniques and left them with models of the repairs. This way the models aided their own learning and will also help them to teach others at their respective institutions.

Traveling in Cuba outside of Havana is not easy or predictable. Cars are not plentiful and are often thirty or more years old. This included the vehicle that Dr. Garcia was able to secure for transportation between Havana and Cienfuegos. During the course, the car broke down and it was impossible to get it fixed in time for the return trip to Havana at the end of the week. Luckily it was possible to hire another car and driver. In addition to the shortage of cars, most areas of Cuba experience power outages and loss of running water. There was no electricity for the first two days of the workshop. Power on the third day allowed the viewing of some slides, but after limited use the bulb of the slide projector burned out, and it was not possible to

find a replacement. Pattison soon confronted the importance of planning for surprises by preparing more materials and activities than can be used in a given time frame and by remaining flexible about the program.

Professional organizations for preservation and conservation are not common in Cuba, especially outside of Havana. An additional benefit of this course was that it allowed archivists and librarians from the region around Cienfuegos to make contacts with other professionals and institutions confronting the same preservation issues and challenges.

LESSONS LEARNED

Cuba has no shortage of good conservators, although it is getting difficult to recruit and retain young conservators. Dollar-based salaries, mainly in the tourist sector of the economy, afford a much higher standard of living than any government job paying Cuban pesos can. Economic conditions seem to have improved steadily since the first visit, which took place near the end of the worst stage of what the Cubans call the "special period." This was a time of scarcity and hardship brought on by the sudden withdrawal of Soviet economic support in 1989. Nevertheless shortages of material resources are still severe, and this includes all kinds of materials and equipment needed for conservation. Cubans are justly famous for figuring out ingenious ways of getting around shortages, thanks to an inventiveness bred of necessity. Therefore NEDCC staff have learned to recognize their own limitations, and they restrict themselves to simply showing what they do and explaining the reasons. The Cubans are left to decide how best to apply these ideas. It has been gratifying in follow-up visits to see new techniques in use, but they are usually modified to answer the requirements of the Cubans. NEDCC avoids saying that things must be done in any particular way, but recognizes that the Cubans are in the best position to judge what is right for their climate, supplies, and circumstances. Still, they do find themselves expressing certain points of view time and again. They suggest that the Cubans fumigate less or not at all (some institutions have already adopted this attitude) and that they do not put too much reliance on air-conditioning, which tends to break down and, even when functioning properly, may be counter-productive in the extreme humidity of the tropics. They recommend that the tropical sun be taken advantage of for light bleaching instead of spending limited resources on building light-bleaching units or resorting to chemical bleaches. They don't encourage Mylar encapsulation. Although encapsulation of archival material is recommended in temperate environments, it may encourage mold growth in the tropics.

Paper and book conservators in Cuba have lagged a little bit behind related specialties and conservation scientists

in terms of professional training opportunities and status, but they seem to be catching up lately. Academic preparation for paper conservators has now existed in Cuba for two years. NEDCC hopes that with its outreach efforts and the attention called to cooperative projects locally they are contributing to raising the profile of Cuban book and paper conservators. Also, Cuban conservators are somewhat isolated and benefit from the additional access to information which NEDCC provides. This need is largely, but not entirely, due to the United States embargo. Cubans are also limited by their historic orientation, first toward Russia and then toward Spain, which has done what it can to step into the breach created by Cuba's current isolation from both the United States and the former Soviet bloc. But, as more and more North American conservators are finding ways to cooperate with their Cuban colleagues, this too is changing. Another very welcome recent development has been the formation of an informal association of conservators which meets in various institutions around Havana, and which scheduled its most recent meeting during Newman's last visit so that he could



Fig. 4. Enclosures and materials for making enclosures are urgently needed by Cuban cultural institutions with paper-based collections.

attend. At these meetings everyone reports on any training and professional travel they have participated in since the last meeting. Newman reported to the group on future activities planned by NEDCC that would be of interest to Cuban conservators.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors would like to close this article with a few recommendations for people who would like to collaborate with Cuban conservators. Learn and use Spanish. Cubans appreciate any effort made to learn their language, of which they are proud. English is less commonly spoken there than in many parts of the world, and Cubans will not make a visitor feel stupid for his or her linguistic shortcomings. Plan on the unexpected and be flexible. Your schedule may change without warning, sometimes for an obvious reason such as when the water stops running in the middle of a demonstration, and sometimes for some less obvious reason which never becomes clear. Choose activities and projects that have tangible and achievable goals. Plan follow-up visits or contacts to monitor further outcomes of your efforts so that it can be seen that your interest is ongoing and genuine. Finally, if you have the opportunity to offer material help, send enclosures or materials to make enclosures (fig. 4). This is without a doubt what is most needed to help preserve Cuba's paper-based collections, which have so much to tell not only about Cuba's history and intellectual and artistic achievements, but also about our own discovery and colonization.

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